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What is Chekhov’s Siren Whispering to Us? On the Unavoidability of the ‘Impossible’ Creation of the Humanities

Key words: humour, hermeneutics, desire, representation.

Abstract


The focus of my reflections on hermeneutics and the humanities is the short story or comic tale by Anton Chekhov entitled “The Siren” (1887) where we encounter two irreconcilable conceptions of representation; the story contains within it a philosophical aporia, but makes no attempt one way or another to resolve it. I believe that the non-metaphysical “adhesion” of this aporia is precisely its humour. Is such a humorous hermeneutics of uncertainty (of oneself) or such a comic approach to what we call the humanities, which is not sceptical because it to a certain extent a priori affirms the world as well as one’s own imperfection, at all possible? If I understand Chekhov correctly, then he confronts us with the problem of the unavoidability of precisely this “impossible” creation of the humanities.

The focus of my reflections on hermeneutics and the humanities will be the short story or comic tale by Anton Chekhov entitled ‘The Siren’ (1887).
Let us first consider the plot: During a break in a courtroom session, while they are waiting for the chairman to write his dissenting opinion, just before they are due to go home to dine, a group of magistrates listens to a description by the court secretary of a magnificent dinner. His portrayal of this splendid dinner, which appeals to the experience and dreams of each one of them, means that the writing of the dissenting opinion is made impossible, since all the listeners, including the magistrate who was writing it, leave the room (and the secretary’s description) in a hurry. Only the secretary remains behind ‘tidying up the papers’.1

It is nearly four o’clock when ‘the magistrates gathered in the conferring room to take off their uniforms and have a short rest’ (148) and, significantly, they are not particularly hungry. We find ourselves in a transitory place, between the courtroom and their homes, and a transitory time, between the magistrates’ routine work and their equally routine meal. And we learn nothing in the story about these routine things. We do not know what the court case is about, we do not know the reasons for the filing of the dissenting opinion, and, as a consequence, we do not know what kind of judicial opinion the chairman is preparing. On the contrary: four o’clock is approaching but from the moment the eponymous Siren begins his speech, ‘physical’ time will be measured only according to the destroyed sheets of paper on which the dissenting opinion was to have been – but never is – written. In short: a crucial translocation occurs in the story. The events associated with physical time are subject to an extreme marginalization, whereas the transitory space and time grow to monstrous proportions. And what is more, from the perspective of this monstrous space and time, it is impossible to speak of physical time, it is simply negated. We find ourselves in a hiatus in time as well as in a hiatus between spaces. Metaphorically speaking, it is a time and space that anticipates waiting for Godot, or Kafka’s search for Sense, except that Chekhov’s waiting and searching are crowned by success, although only in the seductive speech of the Siren. They are therefore attained and questioned simultaneously.2

A large proportion of the story is taken up by the utterances of Zhilin, the court secretary, a fellow ‘with a sugary expression’ (149), spoken in a low voice and after a time in a whisper directed towards each listener individually, so that his statements are as though personal but at the same time heard and listened to by them all. How do we know that these utterances throw each of his listeners off balance? What actually happens? To be precise: nothing. Zhilin describes the splendid dinner, calling on his own experiences and the

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2 This hiatus in space and time, which is ‘filled’ with what is imagined and in which there ensues an ‘adhesion’ to the aporia of representation (which I shall discuss later in this essay), is a characteristic trait of all Chekhov’s writing. It is similar with his ‘comic’ conception of being in the world.
experiences of his individual interlocutors. For him, the point of departure is the feeling of wolfish hunger experienced after great physical exertion (hunting with hounds or travelling a long distance in a rough peasant cart), which intensifies the closer you get to home, triggering the culinary imagination well before you reach there.

This introduction by the Siren sets the model for the whole story.

First, it constructs a powerful opposition between spirit and body, thought and physiology, consciousness and desire (which is strongly associated with what is imagined), where physiology, the body and desire enfeeble and dominate, or even negate the opposing elements (spirit, thought, consciousness). Here are a couple of quotations: ‘If you […] want to have a good appetite, don’t ever think about anything intellectual; anything learned or intellectual always spoils the appetite’ (149). Or, even more explicitly: ‘[…] where food’s concerned, scholars and philosophers are the lowest of the low, and quite frankly, even the pigs eat better’ (149). Furthermore, one of the characters in the story (Mookin) is ‘a young man with a languid melancholy expression, reputed to be a philosopher at odds with circumstances and seeking the purpose of life’ (148), who, like all the other listeners, will eventually flee the place of Zhilin’s descriptions.

Second, the Siren’s speech anticipates the fundamental role that will be played in filling the hiatus in time by what is imagined: ‘Once when I was travelling, I closed my eyes and imagined sucking-pig with horse-radish, and got such an appetite that it made me quite hysterical’ (149). Thus to the oppositions mentioned above we should add one more: what is imagined versus what is realized, where what is imagined wields power over the body, over physiology.

Third and last, the secretary’s introduction indicates how eating is inextricably associated with ‘home’, with returning home, with the domestication of the world. But since what is imagined has been separated from what is realized, the domestication of this world becomes a task that is impossible to carry out. The notion of magnificent food-and-home is separated from home as a place of residence and life, and from consumption. Or to put it in a more radical way: food, as fulfilment, and home, as domestication, remain possible only in what is imagined, in appearance only.

Most of the text, as I suggested above, is taken up by that magnificent dinner, which indicates that our interpretation of it should be inclined to treat it as an evocation of desire, as being concerned with hunger – evoked chiefly through the act of relating or representing, and with the fictionalization and aestheticization of hunger (including the still life: ‘And what about sterlet in a ring’ [151]), that is: with the phantasm of consuming food. Chekhov might thus be enrolled, on the one hand, into the tradition of Anthelme Brillat-Savarin and his La Physiologie du Goût (The Physiology of Taste, 1825) and, on